DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 346 HE 033 103

AUTHOR	Lapadat, Judith C.
TITLE	An Online Discussion about the Politics of Classroom Discourse: Student Identity, Administrative Aims, and School Change.
PUB DATE	2000-04-00
NOTE	30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Attitude Change; College Administration; Communication (Thought Transfer); Computer Uses in Education; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Educational Environment; Graduate Students; Graduate Study; *Group Discussion; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; *Interaction Process Analysis; Internet; Participation; Teacher Education; Teaching Methods; World Wide Web
IDENTIFIERS	*Discourse; Identity Formation; Online Courses; Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed student contributions to an online interactive discussion forum. Participants included six graduate students enrolled in a graduate education course; the instructor also contributed to the online discussions. Students read articles, posted commentaries, and responded to each other on weekly discussion topics. Students also selected articles to present online. The instructor examined the content of the students' postings over the first third of the 13-week course to examine participants' emerging perspectives on: the role of classroom and school discourse in shaping student identity; the role of discourse in reflecting and transforming schools as institutions; and the relationships between school discourse and administrative structures and values. Results reflected an emerging, critical, reflective view of schools as institutions. Participants drew upon personal and professional experiences to persuade and shape group discussion, incorporating other participant's responses in subsequent self-reflections. Students' contributions were generally posted on time; and most students exceeded the minimum requirements for number and length of contributions; and discussions were constructive in tone. Appended are a list of weekly topics and a partial list of nodes. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 443 346

Running Head: DISCOURSE AND SCHOOL CHANGE

An Online Discussion about the Politics of Classroom Discourse: Student Identity, Administrative Aims, and School Change

Judith C. Lapadat

University of Northern British Columbia

Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting

New Orleans, LA

April, 2000

Judith C. Lapadat, Ph.D.
Education Program
College of Arts, Social and Health Sciences
University of Northern BC
3333 University Way
Prince George, BC
Canada, V2N 4Z9
Phone: (250) 960-6667
Fax: (250) 960-5536
E-mail: lapadat@unbc.ca

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. LAPADAT
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

PE 09/03

Abstract

This paper presents a discourse analysis of contributions to an online interactive discussion forum of a graduate-level education course on the topic of Discourse in Classrooms. The purpose of the analysis is twofold. First, I examine the content of postings over the first one third of the thirteen-week course to describe participants' emerging perspectives on: 1) the role of classroom and school discourse in shaping student identity, 2) the role of discourse in reflecting and transforming schools as institutions, and, 3) the relationships between school discourse and administrative structures and values. Second, I present examples of how the discussion topics evolved, and how points of view began to shift over time.

An Online Discussion About the Politics of Classroom Discourse: Student Identity, Administrative Aims, and School Change

In their recent critical examination of the role of the World Wide Web in education, Roschelle and Pea (1999) identify three change vectors: towards collaborative representations, towards advanced socio-cognitive scaffolding, and towards tools that foster self-improving communities. These directions of development can be seen in current thinking about online course development and delivery. For example, Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, and Haag (1995) call for technologically mediated distance education approaches that avoid "ineffective methods that limit learning in face-to-face classrooms" (p. 7), such as those derived from behavioral and symbolic reasoning paradigms. Instead, they suggest that constructivist and situated learning theory be applied to design of online courses, in recognition that "learning is necessarily a social, dialogical process in which communities of practitioners socially negotiate the meaning of phenomena" (p. 9). Taking a similar point of view, Davis and Brewer (1997) have examined how undergraduate students taking an online course create a discourse community online, negotiating multi-party conversations while representing their individual identities.

Schallert, Dodson, Benton, Reed, Amador, Lissi, Coward and Fleeman (1999) point out that it is difficult to foster the kinds of deep discussion that lead to learning, particularly given the dominant social and evaluative role of the teacher. They suggest that, in advanced college seminars where attaining genuine discussion is especially important, computer-mediated communication (CMC) is an alternative discussion forum

that might offer increased access to diverse voices. Cooper and Selfe (1990) concur, pointing out that an advantage of CMC as an alternative discussion forum is that it might "allow interaction patterns disruptive of a teacher-centred hegemony....[enabling students] to create internally persuasive discourse as well as to adopt discourse validated by external authority" (p. 847).

My purpose in this study was to examine the contributions graduate education students made to an online interactive forum of a webcourse on the topic of Discourse in Classrooms. I was interested in the substance of their remarks pertaining to the relationships between school discourse and: 1) student identity, 2) schools as learning environments, and 3) administrative structures and values. In particular, I wondered whether participants primarily viewed classroom and school discourse as reflecting school norms and values and thereby shaping student identity, or whether they also held transformational perspectives about the role of discourse as a stimulus to school change from "the bottom up." I focused on the first one-third of the course in order to trace how participants established their points of view, and initiated and then elaborated these topics of discussion. I also examined how individual and group points of view began to shift over time.

Method

Participants included six graduate students enrolled in an online graduate education course during the winter semester (January -- April, 1998). As the instructor, I also was a participant contributing to the online discussion. Three of the students were in three different distant communities, and the other three resided locally. Two participants were college instructors with specialties in technology and Canadian First Nations

education respectively; one taught adult literacy in a private setting; one not currently practicing had a background in speech-language pathology and English as a Second Language (ESL); one taught high school social studies; and one was an elementary learning assistance teacher in an inner city school. One graduate student was male; the rest of the participants were female.

The course was an asynchronous, text-based webcourse designed by this author in collaboration with an internet site designer[1]. Centered on a conferencing facility (the "Discussion Forum"), we designed the course to be interactive, consistent with critical constructivist principles (Jonassen, et al., 1995). The course topic, Discourse in Classrooms, matched well with a discursive approach to learning. Students read one or two articles per week and posted commentary on the articles and in response to each other on weekly discussion topics (See Appendix A). They also selected two additional articles pertaining to these topics to read individually and present to the class online. They gave brief reports online about their term paper research and about a "mini" research project that they conducted. The environment of heightened meta-linguistic awareness, resulting from both the course topic and availability of a persistent textual record (Herring, 1999), yielded deeply thoughtful contributions from participants which lent themselves particularly well to an analysis of online discourse.

Analysis

During the course, it seemed to me as a co-participant in the discussions, that the class members moved toward a stance on classroom discourse critical of the institution of schooling. I became interested in the substance of their critiques, the way the class

collaboratively constructed a point of view, the way this point of view shifted, and the role of individual contributions to the discussion. Therefore, following completion of the course, I asked the students if I could retain the text of the forum discussions to analyze, and they gave their consent.

The forum discussions were saved as a chronological text file. For this study, I conducted a thematic analysis of the first 100 contributions to the forum (posts, which I separated and saved as separate documents). These represented approximately the first one-third of the thirteen-week course, out of 357 contributions in total. The course topics addressed mostly included those listed for Weeks 1-5 (see Appendix A), but not the complete discussion for any of those weekly topics, as participants could (and did) continue to post to any course topic throughout the semester even after the posting deadline for that topic had passed. Also, it should be noted that emergent discussion themes cut across the pre-established weekly course topics. For example, the theme of "culture" first emerged in a response by Elaine to Rita in Week 2 (013 Elaine), and then continued as a discussion theme in each weekly topic thereafter. I used Qualitative Solutions and Research's (QSR's) NVivo qualitative analysis software (Fraser, 1999; Richards, 1999) to facilitate coding and management of the large data set, and to sort and examine the data at multiple levels.

Results

After preliminary perusal of the data, I created three tree nodes (superordinate categories) with two children (subordinate categories) each to represent the six

---

[1] Co-authored by Judith C. Lapadat and Peter Thompson

substantive change-related themes that emerged in discussion. These hierarchically-ordered categories were:

TREE NODES

4 (1) /discourse & student identity
5 (1 1) /discourse & student identity/discourse reflects identity [420]
6 (1 2) /discourse & student identity/ discourse shapes identity [409]
7 (2) /discourse & administrative structures and values
8 (2 1) /discourse & administrative structures and values/discourse shapes administrative structures and values [153]
9 (2 3) /discourse & administrative structures and values/discourse reflects administrative structures and values [524]
10 (3) /discourse & school learning environment
11 (3 1) /discourse & school learning environment/discourse transforms school learning environment [520]
12 (3 4) /discourse & school learning environment/discourse reflects school learning environment [424]

Note: the numbers in square brackets indicate the number of lines of text coded to that node.

In addition, I created two case types ("grad student" and "instructor") holding seven case nodes. These categories uniquely traced the contributions of each of the seven participants in the discussion. The case nodes were:

CASE NODES

35 .Grad student
36 .Grad student: Colette [64]
37 .Grad student: Elaine [490]
38 .Grad student: Judy [178]
39 .Grad student: Lisa [210]
40 .Grad student: Patrick [27]
41 .Grad student: Rita [674]
42 .instructor
43 .instructor.Professor [337]

Note: the numbers in square brackets indicate the number of lines of text coded to that node.

Finally, I added nodes as needed to reflect categories that emerged inductively from the data and pertained to the stated questions of interest, yet that were not readily categorizable within the existing tree structure. These included two highly elaborated tree nodes for the themes of "culture" (331 lines of coded text) and "evaluation" (233 lines of coded text) that cut across the existing thematic nodes (see Appendix B), as well as the following free (nonhierarchical) nodes:

FREE NODES:
1 registers [117]
2 teacher training [58]
3 transmission [246]

Note: the numbers in square brackets indicate the number of lines of text coded to that node.

Perhaps an obvious first step is to comment on the varying amount of information coded to each node. Beginning with the case nodes, it is clear that not every participant contributed equally to the online discussion during the first one third of the course. Note that the numbers representing lines of coded text do not exhaustively reflect the actual amount of text each person contributed, but only the amount pertinent to the central discussion themes I am tracing in this study. Nevertheless, in rank order, Rita, Elaine, and I ("Professor"[2]) had the most to say. The three of us, and Judy, were present from the beginning of the online discussion, which was initiated by Rita on January 4, the first day of the course. For reasons of technical difficulties, signing up for the course late, and anxiety about contributing online, the others entered the conversation later. Patrick first

introduced himself on January 18, but mostly contributed only brief, general remarks that yielded little to code in this first phase of the course. Lisa overcame technical difficulties, and contributed her first post on January 25 (Lisa 045), but thereafter became very engaged in the discussions. Colette participated passively at first by reading but not contributing, then entered the discussion on February 2 (Colette 080).

There also was some variation in the amount of text coded to each of the originally established tree nodes. In each category, certain key sub-themes emerged, the gist of which I will summarize. Then, I present more detailed thematic traces of class members' views about the notion of change with respect to schools as learning environments, and also about how discourse both reflects and shapes administrative structures and values. Finally, I give an example of how one participant's views on a topic changed over the course of the online discussion.

Discourse and Student Identity

On the two topics relating to classroom discourse and student identity (that discourse reflects student identity, and that it shapes their identity), participants contributed about the same amount of commentary. In particular, Judy's presentation to the class of Chapter 4 from Mortenson's (1994) book, Problematic communication: The construction of invisible walls, a psychological view of how individuals create communication barriers that inhibit their interactions, stimulated a great deal of class discussion about identity and discourse.

---

[2] In the course, we interacted on a first name basis. However, in assigning pseudonyms, I have named myself "Professor" so as not to erase awareness of my privileged position of power as a participant in the discussions.

Sub-themes related to the more constructivist, change-oriented view that discourse *reflects* students' multiple perspectives include, in order of emergence: multiple perspectives, student-directed learning and prior knowledge, cultural and linguistic diversity, collaboration and negotiation, effective speakers, social versus academic language, developmental and ability levels, own point of view, construction of knowledge, impact of interpersonal boundaries, and individual differences. Participants discussed how students contribute in different ways to classroom discourse depending on their prior knowledge; developmental and ability levels; cultural, linguistic and social background; and individual experiences and inclinations. Moreover, they saw that the discursive sharing of multiple perspectives could promote students' development of their own points of view (cognitive construction of knowledge), and that through collaboration and negotiation, students socially construct meaning. However, class members also critiqued these ideas:

> I was talking to a colleague about "stupid immersion" (Mr. N. K.) about putting all the students of the same level into one class (streaming). I feel so uncomfortable with that idea because what they see and learn from each other is exactly that, stupid immersion. However, this colleague said, we don't have enough "good" students to spread around, "the norm is the low end." (043 Rita)

Similarly, Patrick commented:

> "Each child has his or her individual differences: idiosyncrasies and deviant behavior.... The accepting teacher treats all this as legitimate and valuable...." (Sainsbury, 1992, p. 123). YIKES! Can you imagine a grade 5 class, 25 students, Friday afternoon and an accepting teacher tolerating deviant behavior. Sounds like a recipie for a 3 aspirin headache. Great in theory but does in work in a practical situation? (087 Patrick)[3]

---

[3] Spelling and grammar have not been altered. During the course, participants were encouraged to get their ideas down without worrying much about the conventions of writing. Also, throughout the online discussion we discussed numerous texts. Although I encouraged the use of correct referencing, and have

Sub-themes related to the more traditional, transmissive perspective that classroom does (and should) *shape* students' identity include, in order of emergence: social interaction shapes knowledge; uncertainty promotes learning; labelling and sorting; understand rules/induct into discourse; cultural imperialism; develops skills, schemas, theories, critical and autonomous thinking; outside experiences shape identity; socialization; teachers' power and responsibilities; creation of interpersonal boundaries; and motivation. The central idea seemed to be that it is the responsibility of the teacher to socialize students to behavioral and discursive norms, and to teach (induct into, promote, or transmit) knowledge including skills, schemas, rules, theories, and critical and autonomous thinking. Implicit in this discussion is the view that the knowledge students develop becomes part of their identity. So, by the way they structure classroom processes, teachers shape students' knowledge, and thus individual identities. Cutting across this traditional transmissive view also are themes such as how the discourse of schooling can create interpersonal boundaries, the consequences for students of teachers' complicity in labelling and sorting, and the culturally imperialistic nature of traditional classroom discourse. For example, Lisa says:

> I feel that culture influences the building of communication barriers in many ways from the more obvious such as ethnocentric attitudes that exclude other cultures either out of fear, or beacuse the 'other' couldn't possibly have anything worthwhile to say, to the more subtle such as the longer answer time required by some First Nations students. (095 Lisa)

---

added missing references where I could, it is possible that some direct quotations in the discussions may not be formally marked as such.

Discourse and the School Learning Environment

Class participants also had a great deal to say about the relationship between classroom or school discourse and the school learning environment. Early in the course, I proposed that: "because language seems so omnipresent and transparent to us, we forget (or might never have become aware of) its role in structuring classroom interactions, knowledge, and learning processes" (017 Professor), thus essentially stating the theme that discourse *transforms* the school learning environment. A few turns later, Judy reiterates this theme: "in Hicks's (1996) article she states that learning is situational, both context and culture specific and that [it] is mediated by language" (024 Judy). Another support for this idea was the course text, Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik (1995), which takes a strongly constructivist perspective and argues for the integration of language across the curriculum and for thematic approaches to instruction. One particularly interesting thread of the discussion pertained to class members' thoughts about change. They began by questioning whether changing schools[4] as learning environments is possible, and if so, how? They then moved to accepting that teachers have a responsibility to initiate changes within their own classrooms, and discussed practical strategies they could implement (such as spearheading alternative approaches to assessment, learning about cultural differences, and teaching their students discursive skills). They also talked about fear of change, and the importance of teacher reflection and risk-taking. The following selected chronological contributions illustrate the tone of the discussion:

So what to do? Where do you start to change? (027 Rita)

[4] We used "schools" inclusively in our discussion to refer to various educational settings, such as public schools, colleges, universities, and privately run educational programs.

. . . It is so important to have professional development so we can keep up with the current theories of teaching and learning. Without it we will continue to march blindly along to mucic played by the behaviorist band and its inherent transmissional approach to taching/learning. (029 Elaine)

. . . I wonder how we could build that time in..... I more than ever believe teachers are dedicated and want very much to do the best thing, but so many of us have been out of school for so long, and in some cases it's purely a matter of survival, how do we change? (031 Rita)

. . . I believe that individuals *can* make a difference, bit by bit by bit. (034 Professor)

. . . But one thing about change -- it's hard. Oh, and another thing -- it's terrifically exciting and rejuvenating. (035 Professor)

. . . I think you're right that individuals can make a difference but . . . . it seems like such a daunting task. . . . I guess anything worthwhile involves a lot of hard work. (039 Rita)

. . . Perhaps if students aquire the skills they need to participate during discussions in an acceptable manner, we could spend more time on discussion and inquiry and less on classroom management. (050 Elaine)

. . . Effective teaching is a constant process of reflection on and analysis of our everyday practice and its consequences. (059 Lisa)

. . . Risk taking is not something I think teachers are known for, and yet, there are risks in everything we do. (063 Rita)

. . . So often we concentrate on what we view as 'wrong' with the education system because the problems are so easily identified, that we may ignore some of truly great work that is happening out there. Thanks for the reality check. The teacher in this article (Allen, 1992) cared enough and to examine her role as a teacher. Rather than continuing in her role as a distributor of pre-packaged knowledge she became a facilator and shared in the learning process. (083 Elaine)

. . . Why is it that we all (maybe I'm overgeneralizing a bit here) seem so acutely aware of the risks involved in initiating change, yet, for the most part remain oblivious to the risks in persisting with familiar practices that we *know* are not working very well? Those risks might include burn-out and feelings of disillusionment and disempowerment for the teacher, and for students, there are the risks of blighting their love of learning or threatening their sense of self-efficacy or self-worth. (093 Professor)

> . . . Sometimes I feel a bit helpless because what can I do in one little classroom to counteract what seems to be a society wide disease with symptoms of violence, me-first attitudes, apathy, and on and on and on. The answer seems to be to keep trying, keep learning and try to keep in touch with others who haven't given up! (098 Lisa)

Simultaneous with this discussion thread in which class members grappled with the notion of change, was ongoing discussion along more traditional lines. This node contains sub-themes pertaining to the idea that discourse *reflects* the school learning environment. One dominant theme is that school discourse consists of specific registers that must be mastered by all students in order to achieve academic success, even while acknowledging that there is a mismatch between socio-cultural and school-based language expectations and experiences for many students. The second major topic of discussion in this node consisted of class members offering examples of what schools are "really" like in their experience. They portray the "status quo" – schools and classrooms dominated by a transmission approach, including: a rapid pace, a focus on the "right answer," isolation and drilling of skills, an Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) discourse pattern, socialization of students to the school norms, teacher-direction, content emphasis, prepackaged curricular materials, and testing of students' retention of factual information. For example, Colette says "we work against the clock" (084 Colette). Judy says, "These [traditional] classrooms stifle the discourse of students because the students must conform to the discourse of the "European classroom" (024 Judy). Rita points out that "talk in classrooms, including my own, consists of teacher direction" (010 Rita), then later comments on "a gap between the theory and the reality of the classroom" (043 Rita).

Discourse and Administrative Structures and Values

In contrast to the nodes I have mentioned thus far, the two sub-nodes relating to discourse and administrative structures and values received a considerably different amount of commentary by the students. Class members had a lot to say about how school discourse *reflects* administrative values and structures. Although they had many practical ideas about how teachers might initiate changes within their own classrooms, as mentioned above, they paint a much more depressing picture when reflecting on the nature of schools as institutions and how administrative structures and values impact their practice. They describe a school system staffed by under-prepared and under-supported teachers. Elaine says:

> we have an aging teaching population. Emphasis on the correct answer and strategies to get students to give the correct answer have been part of our teacher traing. . . . The important role language has to play was not addressed in my teacher training. I had never heard of, never mind discussed, "children from different cultural backgrounds have different rules for communication" (Pappas, Kiefer & Levstik, 1995, p. 36). (029 Elaine)

Curricula is often "pre-packaged" and "teacher-proof":

> "Give me the opportunity to teach like that!!!" At the moment, I only have one course, English 041, which allows me similar, but limited, freedom. I teach Math at the intermediate and advanced level and OTEC 111 which is a business English at the first year college level. These are 'teacher proof' curricula with set tests, exercises, workbooks-the whole shot!! I feel as though I am teaching in a box! (094 Lisa)

The school system they describe operates based on unexamined assumptions and beliefs about learning, and the existing structure dictates practice. For example, differences may be perceived as deficits by school personnel: "What about students who come to school with a different set of communication norms. Were they placed in the low group? Communicating in a different way may be confused with a limited ability to

think" (041 Elaine). They describe a lack of administrative support for change, reflected by insufficient funding, resource support, time for planning or teaching, or encouragement to try alternative approaches; and a lack of curricular leadership. Instead, administrative values and imposed structures focus on efficiency and accountability, as measured by test results:

> I remember doing Humanities 8 trying to integrate English and socials and science. That was a tough task. Getting materials was difficult (no $) . . . . only one or two teachers are trying something, the success rate is not going to be that great. . . . I believe that there is a real emphasis on delivering a product - black and white clear cut MARK. They'd better be pretty good too as evidenced by the froth caused by looking at exam results only; hence the need for an Academic Review Committee, hence attendance and late policies, minimize field trips, and extra curricular activities, keep those kids in their seats producing. . . . Efficiency and productivity rule! (027 Rita).

However, class members did not fault their school administrators for this situation:

> Our district is under incredible pressure to show that they are using their current funding in the most efficient way possible, in order to jstify an increase in funding. Our administrators do not have time to be curriculum leaders- they are too busy 'managing' the school- showing that we have an action plan that will improve student achievement. Our administrators are in a vunerable position. They must adhere to the will of the board. I believe it was two years ago that all the VP's in the district were fired and then some of them were re-hired. Job security for our admins? It doen't appear that they have any. (028 Elaine)

Ultimately, the discussion turned to examining our underlying philosophies of education, and how different stakeholders (e.g., employers) may influence educational aims. Lisa says:

> According to educators such as Friere, Apple and McLaren, education cannot be neutral because it is a political and cultural act. We can educate students to take their appointed places in the hierarcy of society as it is, or we can educate them to understand, analyze, and change what exists now to make a better society (McLaren, 1994). Studying discourse as it occurs in the classroom and analyzing

> how this is related to culture and society would help me to understand whether I am educating for the status quo, or for social change. (066 Lisa)

However, the change-oriented perspective that discourse can or actually does *shape* administrative values and structures was relatively underrepresented in the webcourse discussions. Although class members had much to say about the largely negative impact of administrative structures on their practice, they did see themselves as having some limited power to make changes in their own classrooms. This sense of agency did not seem to carry over to the possibility of initiating wider systemic changes, however. Conversely, I believe that discourse can be a means to make visible, to critique, and ultimately, to initiate changes to established power structures and traditional lines of thinking. Therefore, I was an active contributor to this discussion node.

The topic was initiated by my point that "schools also **reflect** and even **are constructed by** multiple social discourses. So teachers need to be aware of these different discourses" (016 Professor). Most of the contributions coded to this node were either very tentative about the notion of administrative change (can we change?) or bluntly negative about the possibility of change (why we cannot change). For example, Elaine says, "I wonder if this type of assessment will ever be accepted by the powers above" (027 Elaine), and later, "The present move toward accountability and efficiency in education is like a steam roller out of control. Who is going to stop it?" (028 Elaine). Rita remarks:

> I think it is time we raised our heads and questioned what we are doing, what is happening and how we can make changes. Just because something has gone on for years and years, (all the way back to Taylor and the boys) why does it mean we have to continue to do just that? (031 Rita)

I then argued for the notion of taking individual responsibility:

> I believe that individuals *can* make a difference, bit by bit by bit. It is tempting to put the onus for change on those "above" us with more "power" or to just give up because it seems so big and overwhelming. But, I think it is important to remember that our institutions and beliefs and practices are a *joint* construction. (034 Professor)

Rita responds:

> I had this awful feeling in the pit of my stomach as I was reading some of the comments. Perhaps we are trying to evade our responsibility by putting blame on those above us (I'm only reflecting here) because it's easier than actually taking control. (039 Rita)

Lisa points out that "education cannot be neutral because it is a political and cultural act" (066 Lisa), and I add that "our educational approaches should go beyond cognitive development (change within an individual) to social critique and transformation" (074 Professor). However, the conversation then turns larger forces that shape the current educational context:

> Maynes (1996) believes that the campaign to discredit public education has been deliberate. He notes that in July 1995 the Ontario Minister of Education, John Snoblen, stated that it would be useful to invent a crisis in public education in order to justify educational reform. Critics of public education have relentlessly pointed out that our students can't compete with students in other countries. These critics appear to manipulate the stats for their own purposes- to justify funding cuts. (075 Elaine)

None of the graduate students' remarks described practical steps that they, as teachers, could take to influence administrative structures and values. Nor did they seem to believe that the change-oriented discourse described in educational research that they were reading had the potential to shift administrative values or to influence change, given the externally supported "steamroller" of the efficiency and accountability movement. They seemed to see change as possible only within a limited sphere – that is, within their own points of view and their own classroom practices.

Shifts in Perspectives

From these data it is clear that class members' points of view were, in fact, developing and changing, even over the short period encompassed by the beginning weeks of this course. In the six nodes or key themes described above, discussions evolved through the contributions of each participant. A good example is the discussion on how discourse reflects administrative values and structures. Conversation began with anecdotes illustrating a hopelessly restrictive, unbending system, and gradually turned to overarching societal processes, and to a discussion of the philosophy of education that underlies systemic choices.

Just as topics in the conversation were constructed dialogically, so too did individual participants' perspectives develop and change. Rita's views on transmission, for example, began to change over the time frame of this discussion. At the beginning, she portrayed herself as teaching in a transmissive way. "Talk in classrooms, including my own, consists of teacher direction. . . . I don't know how many times I've had an answer in mind when I asked a question. I've had a hard time accepting the student's answer because it wasn't what I expected" (010 Rita). As the course proceeds, she begins to question the notion of transmission: "transmission of knowledge is fine for some basic information perhaps, I'm even beginning to question that" (021 Rita), and "frightening concept 'direct reproduction of what is to be taught' – moral of the story, children do not have their own prior knowledge. I don't think I would like to be treated like that, but I know I have done so" (031 Rita). She begins to use the focus on the "right answer" as a metaphor for what is wrong with the transmission of knowledge approach:

> This right answer business is really concerning me. Even though we say we're after critical thinkers and problem solvers and trying to make our students (no matter the age) lovers of learning, the "right answer" still sits out there. Even if not in our class at a particular moment, but out there on government or standardized exams. (054 Rita)

Finally, she comments:

> We give a lot of lip service to what we are supposedly doing in our classrooms such as creating critical thinkers, problem solvers, and delivering a love of life-long learning. But how can that be, when the students don't get to talk or solve problems that are meaningful to them. How do you show a love of life long learning when the teacher is mainly interested in covering the topic because it's going to be on the exam? How do students learn to take risks when teachers are have the correct answer in mind, and when marks are so very important? I believe the effort and risk are worthwhile. (063 Rita)

Thus, even during this relatively short time frame, Rita's perspectives about her teaching practices began to shift. Similar changes in point of view can be identified for other class participants. I believe that this can be attributed in large part to the intense discussion, writing, reading, and reflection that the seven class members engaged in through the medium of this online interactive graduate course.

Discussion

In this study, I examined six main themes of discussion that emerged in the beginning weeks of an online graduate education course: discourse as reflecting or shaping student identity, the role of discourse in either changing schools as learning environments or supporting the status quo, and ways that discourse reflects or might serve to transform administrative structures and values[5]. The analysis focused on both the substance of the students' and my own stated perspectives, and on constructing a dynamic

[5] What we meant by "discourse" was negotiated, as well. We considered various definitions (Gee, 1996; Hicks, 1996, Pappas, Kiefer & Levstik, 1995; and Schiffrin, 1994), and participants used the word to refer to the micro and the macro, the linguistic and social, and the personal and political at various points in the discussions.

trace of how class members negotiated meaning to construct a critical, political stance on classroom discourse.

The thematic analysis of participants' contributions reflected an emerging critical stance. Participants particularly focused on how ways of talking in classrooms disadvantage some students, and their responsibilities as educators to mitigate these negative consequences by making changes in their own knowledge base and teaching practices. They also began to explore the idea that educational authorities legitimize these marginalizing discourses by normalizing them as institutional routines, and they called for examination of the underlying educational philosophies. For example, the role of testing in categorizing or excluding diverse students was a recurring subtopic that cut across the six themes. On the other hand, most of the participants resisted the idea that schools and other educational institutions could change at the systemic level, and most viewed school discourse as reflective of the institution, rather than as transformative.

With respect to the question of how class members discursively negotiated and constructed meaning, individuals drew on their own personal and professional experiences to persuade and to shape group discussion. They also incorporated other participants' responses in their subsequent self-reflections on their own claims. As an example, a resource room teacher in an urban inner school saw herself as an advocate for her students and, increasingly over the course discussions, began to explore the possibility that she could take a role as a "change agent" in her school. As another example, an adult educator sympathetic to Freire's notion of critical literacy began to recognize and discuss the inherent conflict between her transformative philosophy and

the transmissive nature of the pre-packaged Adult Basic Education courses she was hired to teach.

It is interesting to examine my role in the discussion as the instructor. My aims were to model a critical stance, to pose provocative questions, and to refuse to take up a role as authority or sole holder of knowledge. On the whole, this strategy appeared successful, in that it gave students permission to "sound off" and to explore more critical stances, as well as providing a safe atmosphere for them to examine the gap between change-oriented theory and the more traditional approaches to teaching that they practiced or observed in their settings. However, students remained persistent in trying to discover my viewpoints and cater to them, and I was not always able to resist the temptation to pontificate from my position of privilege. The trace of participants' contributions shows that, despite positioning myself as participant rather than as leader/expert, my contributions sometimes had an inordinate amount of influence on the direction of the discussions, as can be seen in the discussion thread on changing schools as learning environments. On the other hand, my efforts to prompt discussion about how to initiate changes to administrative structures and values apparently had little effect on students' views in this beginning stage of the course, as judged by the relatively few contributions by the students to this thread and the very tentative or bluntly negative tone of those contributions.

A final note of interest concerns the level of participants' engagement in discussion. Student were explicitly informed at the beginning of the course that they were expected to contribute at least one response to the Weekly Discussion Topic, as well as to respond to each Article Presentation posted by a class member. They were further

informed that they must adhere to weekly posting deadlines (but could work ahead if they wanted). Also, I provided the following guideline: "As this course is organized around interaction and discussion, personal opinions and perspectives are encouraged. However, class members must ensure that their contributions are cordial, respectful, and constructive in tone."

Clearly, the participants took these guidelines seriously, as their contributions were almost always posted by the deadline. Moreover, many of them remarked that they found participation in the discussions very satisfying, and most of the students far exceeded the minimum requirements for length and number of contributions. For example, discussions on weekly topics from early in the course continued to receive extra postings long after the deadline had passed. Finally, the discussions were unfailingly constructive in tone, even when points of view differed strongly. An example is the following interaction initiated by Patrick:

> How about peer group culture created in a classroom situation. I have had the experience with an class of adult learners where other students would say openly that a person's question was stupid. . . . If an instructor recognizes a personal barrier should she try to break it or challenge it? Do we draw a line between instructor and psychotherapist? (088 Patrick)

> . . . . Yikes! You would hope that as adult learners they would know better. It sounds like you need to remind or teach them what a constructive comment is- have some tolerance and empathy here folks! (090 Elaine)

It appears, therefore, that this online course format was successful both in fostering genuine and deep discussion (Schallert, et al., 1999), and in providing an alternative discussion forum where all students' voices were heard (Copper & Selfe, 1990).

The examination of how individual and group perspectives shifted over time is still in progress, pending analysis of the remaining contributions to the course. These

preliminary results suggest that, overall, class members developed a greater awareness of the role of talk in teaching and learning, including its cultural, cognitive, and political aspects. Also, they developed a more critical and questioning view of schools as institutions.

References

Allen, S. (1992). Student-sustained discussion: When students talk and the teacher listens. In N. A. Branscombe, D. Goswami, & J. Schwartz (Eds.). Students teaching: Teachers learning (pp. 81-95). Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook.

Cooper, M. M., & Selfe, C. L. (1990). Computer conferences and learning: Authority, resistance, and internally persuasive discourse. College English, 52, 847-869.

Davis, B. H., & Brewer, J. P. (1997). Electronic discourse: Linguistic individuals in virtual space. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Fraser, D. (1999, September). QSR NUD*IST VIVO: Reference guide (2nd ed.). Melbourne, Australia: Qualitative Solutions and Research.

Gee, J. P. (1996). Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses (2nd ed.) London. UK: Taylor & Francis.

Herring, S. (1999). Interactional coherence in CMC. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 4 (4). [http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol4/issue4/herring.html]

Hicks, D. (1996). Introduction. In D. Hicks (Ed.), Discourse, learning, and schooling (pp. 1-25). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Jonassen, D., Davidson, M., Collins, M., Campbell, J., & Haag, B. B. (1995). Constructivism and computer-mediated communication in distance education. The American Journal of Distance Education, 9 (2), 7-26.

Maynes, B.(1996). Inner city education in the world of the New Right. The Canadian School Executive, 16 (5). Vancouver, BC.

McLaren, P. (1994). Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education. New York: Longman.

Mortenson, C. D. (1994). Problematic communication: The construction of invisible walls. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Pappas, C. C., Kiefer, B. Z., & Levstik, L. S. (1995). An integrative language perspective in the elementary school: Theory into action (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.

Richards, L. (1999, September). Using NVivo in qualitative research (2nd ed.). Melbourne, Australia: Qualitative Solutions and Research.

Roschelle, J., & Pea, R. (1999). Trajectories from today's WWW to a powerful educational infrastructure. Educational Researcher, 28 (5), 22-25, 43.

Sainsbury, M. (1992). Meaning, communication, and understanding in the classroom. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate.

Schallert, D. L., Dodson, M. M., Benton, R. E., Reed, J. H., Amador, N. A., Lissi, M. R., Coward, F. L., & Fleeman, B. F. (1999, April). Conversations that Lead to Learning in a Computer Age: Tracking how Individuals make Sense of Socially Shared Classroom Conversations. Paper presented at the meeting of American Educational Research Association, Montreal, QC.

Schiffrin, D. (1994). Approaches to discourse. Cambridge: Blackwell.

Appendix A: Weekly Topics

Week 1: Introduction to the course, the class and the topic
Week 2: The nature of classroom discourse and theoretical supports for teaching practices
Week 3: Integrating language across the curriculum -- Elementary classrooms
Week 4: Empirical studies of language interaction in classrooms
Week 5: Language in classrooms -- Secondary and post-secondary contexts
Week 6: Research design and ethics in classroom discourse research
Week 7: Integrating language across the curriculum -- Reading, writing, language arts, and literacy
Week 8: Inquiry-oriented approaches to learning across subject areas
Week 9: Class members' investigations of issues in classroom discourse research
Week 10: Analysis methods in classroom discourse research
Week 11: Classroom discourse and diversity among learners
Week 12: Who contributes to the discourse of knowledge? Language and power in education
Week 13: Class members' research projects investigating aspects of discourse in classrooms.

Appendix B: Partial List of Nodes

NVivo revision 1.1.127 Licensee: Judith Lapadat

Project: Web Discourse User: Lapadat Date: 04/14/2000 - 3:01:23 PM
NODE LISTING

Nodes in Set: All Nodes
Number of Nodes: 43
FREE NODES:

1 registers
2 teacher training
4 transmission

TREE NODES

4 (1) /discourse & student identity
5 (1 1) /discourse & student identity/reflects identity
6 (1 2) /discourse & student identity/shapes identity
7 (2) /discourse & administrative structures and values
8 (2 1) /discourse & administrative structures and values/shapes administrative structures and values
9 (2 3) /discourse & administrative structures and values/reflects administrative structures and values
10 (3) /discourse & school learning environment
11 (3 1) /discourse & school learning environment/transforms school learning environment
12 (3 4) /discourse & school learning environment/reflects school learning environment
13 (4) /culture
14 (4 1) /culture/differential access to learning
15 (4 2) /culture/teachers' knowledge
16 (4 3) /culture/seen as deficit
17 (4 4) /culture/students bring diverse experiences and knowledge
18 (4 5) /culture/teachers' attitudes
19 (4 6) /culture/impact on classroom discourse
20 (4 7) /culture/teaching enforces conformity
21 (4 8) /culture/home-school mismatch
22 (4 9) /culture/ways to develop cross cultural competence
23 (4 10) /culture/impact on students' self concept
24 (5) /evaluation
25 (5 1) /evaluation/marks seen as valued and important
26 (5 2) /evaluation/negative consequences of marks emphasis
27 (5 3) /evaluation/standardized tests
28 (5 4) /evaluation/alternative approaches to evaluation
29 (5 5) /evaluation/sorting and labelling students
30 (5 6) /evaluation/accountability

31 (5 7) /evaluation/efficiency
32 (5 8) /evaluation/questioning the value of marks
SEARCH RESULTS (TREE NODES)
33 (6) /Search Results
34 (6 1) /Search Results/Rita's views on transmission
CASE NODES
35 .Grad student
36 .Grad student: Colette
37 .Grad student: Elaine
38 .Grad student: Judy
39 .Grad student: Lisa
40 .Grad student: Patrick
41 .Grad student: Rita
42 .instructor
43 .instructor.Professor